DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 716 CS 507 289

AUTHOR Backlund, Phil
TITLE Communication Competence and Its Impact on Public Education.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (76th, Chicago, IL, November 1-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Competency Based Education; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Criteria; *Interpersonal Communication; Listening Skills; Public Education; Public Schools; Skill Development; *Speech Communication; Speech Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Competencies; Speech Communication Association

ABSTRACT

The efforts associated with the communication competence movement, both within and without the Speech Communication Association, have done much to promote the inclusion of listening and speaking skills in the public schools to date, but areas remain where progress is still needed. Over the past 15 years, the most significant change has been the increase in recognition of and attention to oral communication. Other notable advances are evident in curriculum design, development in assessment criteria, improved contacts with professional associations in education, and integration of the language arts. One area with only minor progress is the problem of definitions, evidenced by inconsistent definitions of communication skills at the state, district, and local levels. Other areas in line for improvement include research into children's communication competence, greater impact on textbook writers for public schools, increased collaborative efforts by educators, and a renewed optimism within the educational community that oral communication competence can be achieved. (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED324716

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

Phil Backlund

Central Washington University

Paper Presented at the

Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association

Chicago, 1990

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Phil Backlund

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 507 282

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

Phil Backlund

Central Washington University

The communication competence movement, loosely defined, as been with us for about fifteen years. Has this movement had any impact on public education? Simply put, yes, it has. After all, many efforts associated with the competence movement, both within and without SCA, were designed to achieve that very goal. However, the goals of some of the original writers like Ron Allen, Ken Brown, Ron Bassett and others have not been totally (or even closely) realized. My purpose here is to briefly review the past fifteen years of accomplishments in this general series of efforts. Where were we fifteen years ago in 1975? Where are we now? To answer the question, and to provide a perspective, let us compare 1990 to 1975. This paper is then organized into two parts; a) a summary of the progress that has been made, and b) a description of areas where progress is still needed.

In 1975, the terms "competence" and "competency" had not yet achieve their soon to be "fad" status. This changed with a vengeance in 1976 and 1977. The competency movement swept the educational scene like new ideas before it. Literally dozens of educational reports called for a move to "competency based" education. The Federal Government, most of the states, and most of the education associations climbed on the bandwagon.

The Speech Communication Association saw this as an opportunity to reach an Association goal--to become more active in public education and to increase the amount of time devoted to the teaching of speaking and listening skills in the public schools. The first effort from SCA was the publication of Ron Allen and Ken Brown's book Developing Communication Competence in Children (1976). This was followed two years later by Carl Larson and others' Assessing Functional Communication (1978). Numerous articles followed in SCA journals. The SCA National Office began to place more emphasis on educational concerns with the creation of the position of "Director of Educational Services" and the Instructional Development Division began to attract a wider range of people.

These efforts, and the ones that followed over the next decade, did much to promote the inclusion of speaking and listening skills in the public schools. This inclusion though, was only partially due to the competence movement. In fact, the competence movement itself in general public education had pretty much died out by the mid-nineteen eighties. The efforts that followed were motivated by the competence movement, but many of the changes in the public schools regarding speaking and listening were not tied to

"competence" directly. The inclusion related both to the competency movement and to general interest in speaking and listening skills.

Having said that, let us take a look at the changes that have taken place over the past fifteen years. The progress can be described best by describing the following points.

ADVANCES

1) General interest. Probably the most significant change in the past fifteen years has simply been the increase in recognition of and attention to oral communication. Both inside and outside the discipline of speech communication, this attention has generated greater respect for speaking and listening skills in the public schools. Within SCA, communication education has achieved a higher degree of attention and recognition than it may have had fifteen years ago. The National office has increased its attention to communication education through devoting resources to a Director of Educational Services and through support of the Educational Policies Board. The Instructional Development Division has increased its membership and its activities.

Outside SCA, evidence of increased attention to speaking and listening skills abounds. The federal government included speaking and listening in its definition of basic skills back in 1978. That single event lead to a huge increase in efforts on the part of states to develop curriculum objectives in speaking and listening. For five years, the Committee on Assessment and Testing tracked the activities of the states in this area. That data shows that thirty-two states have included oral communication either in curriculum programs or assessment programs. These states are making a concerted effort to generate more attention to speaking and listening skills. A large number of strides have been made in articulating these skills. Most of these states would probably not have made the effort if it weren't for the new definition of basic skills from the federal government.

The rationale for including speaking and listening in public education has much more highly developed in the past fifteen years. SCA has published a "Rationale Kit: Statements Supporting Speech Communication," updated in 1989. The kit includes rationale statements from twenty-nine sources including the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Carnegie Foundation, National Council of Teachings of English, US Department of Education, The College Board, and others.

The bottom line is that states now do have curriculum programs in speaking and listening where they didn't before.

2) Advances in curriculum. Evidence is spotty, but it would appear from a search of indexes and publications in education that many (and the number is difficult to determine) school districts or groups of districts are developing curriculum guides in speaking and listening. The author's home state of Washington has developed a comprehensive set of language arts curriculum guidelines for the public schools. The schools aren't doing a great deal with it, but it is there. The District of Columbia public

schools published, in 1988, a guide entitled "English language arts oral communication, elementary level competency based curriculum." These guides, and others like them, are good examples of the advances made in this area.

The Administrative Committee of SCA is considering approving a document called "Guidelines for the development and revision of kindergarten through twelfth grade communication curricula." This document was developed by the Educational Policies Board this year. This effort, as described in the overview, has four purposes. 1) The curriculum guidelines extend SCA's prior elementary and secondary education efforts. 2) SCA needs to exercise leadership in responding to the curriculum gap which has been recognized by other education associations and is rapidly becoming a popular and political issue. 3) Curriculum guidelines would allow SCA to enhance its status in the academic community and more effectively serve elementary and secondary communication teachers. 4) The guidelines would establish a relationship between SCA and a new group of students, the majority, who otherwise will not be exposed to content standards by SCA. The rationale for these guidelines describes a clear need for this material and background for the development of the guidelines.

The changes in this area in the past fifteen years has been tremendous.

3) Development in assessment. Small strides have been made in assessment. Issues have been identified, needed products described, and greater attention has been made to the importance of assessment. SCA has sponsored and published a wide range of articles and books in the assessment of oral communication skills. Our knowledge of assessment has increased a significant amount.

Outside SCA, various agencies are also interested in the assessment of oral communication skills. For example, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has published a consumer guide for the assessment of communication competence in speaking and listening (Arter, 1989). It lists seventy-one sources in its reference section, all written after 1975. Various states have given a great deal of attention to assessment, most notably Massachusetts, Illinois, and Florida. Others have given the responsibility (and the encouragement) for assessment to local school districts.

4) Other associations. SCA and its members have developed a far larger series of contacts with other professional associations in education—notably the National Council of Teachers of English, and Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, and Association of Teacher Educators. These contacts have increased the visibility of SCA, have increased the attention paid to speaking and listening skills, and have increased the degree of respect accorded to oral communication.

5) Integration of the language arts. One of the most promising developments is the movement for the integration of language arts. Many school districts and associations are exploring this idea. The most positive aspect of this movement has been the attention paid to speaking and listening by people who

otherwise would not have given it a second thought. The other valuable contribution of this development is the opportunity to develop positive working relationships with associations like NCTE, the International Reading Association, and other related groups.

While this brief review does not cover all the progress made, it does summarize the most positive contributions of the competency movement to public education. We have made a great deal of progress. But, have we finished? We have not.

Areas That Still Need Change

While SCA and individual scholars have made some strides in promoting oral communication competence in the public schools, there is still much to be done. The following list describes some of the areas that need attention in the next few years if we are to continue the progress made in the past decade. This list is strictly the opinion of the author of this paper.

1) Consistency of skills. One problem has plagued these efforts from the beginning with only minor progress being made in the past decade is the problem of definitions. There exists very few agreed upon definitions of basic skills in oral communication. From state to state, district to school district, and from division to division in SCA, a lack of consistency in definitions of communication skills is clearly evident. Let us review some examples in the area of listening.

Georgia includes the following curriculum objectives for listening skills.

1. The learner will:
   - -learn multiple an specific meanings of words, their denotations and connotations.
   - -understand figurative language, idiomatic expressions, colloquial terms and allusions
   - -learn specialized vocabularies
2. Listen and respond for a variety OF purposes
   - -pleasure and enjoyment
   - -to follow directions
   - -to make intelligent consumer judgments
   - -to function as an informed citizen
   - -to obtain information
   - -to apply information heard to new situations
3. Recognize and discriminate among common sounds and sound signals in his/her environment
4. Recognize and recall the following when specifically stated by the speaker
   - -main idea
   - -details
   - -sequence
   - -cause-effect

Maine

1. Recognition and discrimination
   - -discriminate between speech sounds
   - -demonstrate attentiveness and courtesy in listening situations
   - -demonstrate effective listening skills
   - -recognize the effects intonation, pitch, and juncture on meaning

2. Comprehension
   - -follow orally presented directions
   - -identify the sequence of events in an orally presented selection
   - -retell a story that is presented orally
   - -identify the point of view of the speaker or an orally presented selection
   - -identify the tone, mood, and persuasive techniques used in an orally presented selection

3. Interpretation
   - -predict the outcome of an orally presented selection
   - -interpret the emotional tone of an orally presented selection
   - -interpret gestures and other nonverbal communication
   - -analyze cause and effect relationships in an orally presented selection

4. Evaluation
   - -distinguish between fact and fiction in an orally presented selection
   - -given an orally presented selection, distinguish among fact, fiction, opinion, assumption, and inference
   - -recognize the influence of cultural, social, educational and environmental factors on speech

Massachusetts

1. Basic listening skills
   - -recognize words and phrases used by the speaker
   - -indicate why the speaker can or cannot be understood

2. Understanding what you hear
   - -understand spoken words and ideas
   - -identify and understand main ideas
   - -associate important details with main ideals
   - -understand speaker's purpose

3. using what you hear
   - -understand and respond to survival words used in emergency situations
   - -summarize information and draw conclusions
   - -recognize when words and phrases are used to convince ore persuade
   - -follow straightforward directions

Michigan

1. Identify the main idea of an oral presentation of appropriate length
2. Identify the most appropriate summary of a selection presented orally
3. Identify the purpose of an oral presentation
4. Recall information presented orally
5. Identify cause and effect relationships within an oral presentation

Texas--Program goals

1. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in attending to a speaker.
2. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in following oral directions.
3. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in analyzing an oral presentation.
4. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in responding to oral presentations.

Utah

1. Given oral directions to do a task involving at least three steps, the student will listen to the directions once and follow them with 100% accuracy.
2. Given a listening situation in which the student hears a story, he/she will retell the significant events sequentially, either orally or in written form.
3. Given clear, concise oral presentation containing several important facts, the student will summarize orally or in written form the essential details of the presentation.
4. Listens and responds appropriately to commercials, instructions, and other oral communication necessary as a consumer of goods and services.
5. listens and responds appropriately to questions and other oral communication related to career.
6. Listens and responds appropriately to doctor's instructions, safety warnings, and other oral communication related to health and safety.
6. Listens and responds appropriately to statements by elected officials, participants in a discussion and other citizenship related oral communication.

This brief sample of listening objectives clearly shows one thing: a universally accepted definition of listening does not exist. This is true, to a lesser extent, for definitions of speaking skills.

Should a single definition of each exist? To get a beginning answer to that, we can look at other associations. For example, does an accepted definition of reading exist? Obviously, scholars in reading to have their differences of opinion. But they sem to be able to present a more united front to the outside world. Scholars in reading have, at least, been able to generate enough commonalty to influence textbook writers and curriculum directors to view reading in a fairly similar fashion. We have not done that with listening nor speaking. We spend a good deal of time in SCA arguing over definitions. I do not have an answer to this difficulty, but it is one that certainly impedes our progress.

2) Research. A second major need is for greater research in the in children's communication competence. This has not been a very high priority within SCA. In fact, most of the research in communication competence has not been oriented to public education. We need research on the effectiveness of curriculum, on the progress of skill development over time, and the relationship between the four communication skills.

Research is also needed in the assessment of oral communication skills. This past summer, forty five people met in Denver with the intention of making progress in this vital area. The conference participants did make valuable decisions that will have longterm effects on this Association. These decisions were reported in earlier sessions at this convention and are available from this author of this paper.

In spite of progress at that conference, a great deal of work needs to be done. Some states, notably Florida, are highly interested in oral communication education, but are currently stymied by the lack of effective assessment tools. In my opinion, this is the single greatest impediment to progress in furthering the development of curriculum material in speaking and listening.

3) Steam. This brings us to a related point. The above paragraph described how the lack of assessment tools is slowing educational efforts. It is my belief that many people in the educational community, outside of SCA, are developing a pessimistic view on the chance that we will ever solve the problem. The competency movement may be running out of steam in certain areas. Efforts to include speaking and listening may be slowed by the lack of available materials--textbooks, exercises, assessment procedures, and other support information. Can we allow that? How do we generate more steam?

4) Textbooks. The oral communication competency movement has had minimal impact on textbook writers for the public schools. We simply need to develop greater ties with textbook publishers and do all we can to attain even 50% of the time and effort devoted to reading and writing in these books. If we can do that, we will have made a great deal of progress.

5) Collaborative efforts. While collaborative efforts with other professional associations have certainly increased in the past fifteen years, we need to do more. We need to develop greater ties with these organizations. Each of us needs to ally him or herself to at least one organization in the field of education. Collaborative efforts done in a positive, cooperative mode will have a far reaching impact on our success level. We cannot afford to take a competitive, turf-protecting stance.

CONCLUSION

Where does all this leave us? We can spend quite a bit of time and effort in convention programs like this describing what we might do, we can argue about definitions, and we can research the fine points of competence. We need to do that, but as we do it, let's look at our audience.

Look at the children coming into our public schools. Do they still need communication skills? Do they need to know how to speak and listen? In a society that is producing bulletproof coats for kids to wear to school, I'd say the answer is yes. Fifteen years ago, I was reading Bernstein's theories of elaborated and restricted code. One of Bernstein's points described the inverse relationship between a person's ability to express themselves effectively and their tendency to use violence as a means to resolve conflict. That's an oversimplified summary, but I think it is true. Children in the public schools need to have the fundamental belief in the power of the spoken word and in their ability to use that power with positive effect. Kids today come to school with so much excess baggage--abuse, drugs, broken homes, low readiness, so many problems that make learning difficult. Some wonder if it is worth it. If we, you and I, can do one thing each to increase the competence and confidence of one child, we will have made progress. We have made valuable progress in the past fifteen years the theory, research, curriculum, and assessment. Let's make even more progress where it counts the most, with the kids.

REFERENCES

Allen, R. R. & Brown, K. (1976). Developing Communication Competence in Children. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

Arter, Judith (1990). Assessing Communication Competence in Speaking and Listening. Portland: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.

Larson, C. E. & others. (1978). Assessing Functional Communication. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.